

“The First-Born of Egypt”
“The Dance of Death”

BY
ROBERT BROWNING



New York
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1913

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THE FIRST-BORN OF EGYPT.¹

- THAT night came on in Egypt with a step
 So calmly stealing in the gorgeous train
 Of sunset glories flooding the pale clouds
 With liquid gold, until at length the glow
 Sank to its shadowy impulse and soft sleep
 Bent o'er the world to curtain it from life —
 Vitality was hushed beneath her wing —
 Pomp sought his couch of purple — care-
 worn grief
 Flung slumber's mantle o'er him. At that
 hour
- 10 He in whose brain the burning fever fiend
 Held revelry — his hot cheek turn'd awhile
 Upon the cooler pillow. In his cell
 The captive wrapped him in his squalid
 rags,
 And sank amid his straw. Circean sleep!
 Bathed in thine opiate dew false hope
 vacates
 Her seat in the sick soul, leaving awhile
 Her dreamy fond imaginings — pale fear
 His wild misgivings, and the warm life-
 springs
 Flow in their wonted channels — and the
 train —
- 20 The harpy train of care forsakes the heart.
 Was it the passing sigh of the night wind
 Or some lorn spirit's wail — that moaning
 cry
 That struck the ear? 'tis hushed — no!
 it swells on
 On — as the thunder peal when it essays
 To wreck the summer sky — that fearful
 shriek
 Still it increases — 'tis the dolorous plaint,
 The death cry of a nation —
- It was a fearful thing — that hour of night.
 I have seen many climes, but that dread
 hour
- 30 Hath left its burning impress on my soul
 Never to be erased. Not the loud crash
 When the shuddering forest swings to the
 red bolt
 Or march of the fell earthquake when it
 whelms
 A city in its yawning gulf, could quell
 That deep voice of despair. Pharaoh arose
 Startled from slumber, and in anger sought
 The reason of the mighty rushing throng
 At that dark hour around the palace gates,
 — And then he dashed his golden crown
 away
- 40 And tore his hair in frenzy when he knew
 That Egypt's heir was dead — from every
 home,
 The marbled mansion of regality
 To the damp dungeon's walls — gay
 pleasure's seat
 And poverty's lone hut, that cry was heard
 As guided by the Seraph's vengeful arm
 The hand of death held on its withering
 course,
 Blighting the hopes of thousands. —

¹ From the Ms. on the same sheet of paper
 as the letter from Sarah Flower and in her
 handwriting.

I sought the street to gaze upon the grief
 Of congregated Egypt — there the slave
 Stood by him late his master, for that hour 50
 Made vain the world's distinctions — for
 could wealth
 Or power arrest the woe? — Some were
 there
 As sculptured marble from the quarry late
 Of whom the foot first in the floating dance,
 The glowing cheek hued with the deep'ning
 flush
 In the night revel — told the young and
 gay.
 No kindly moisture dewed their stony eye,
 Or damp'd their ghastly glare — for they
 felt not:
 The chain of torpor bound around the heart
 Had stifled it for ever. Tears stole down 60
 The furrow'd channels of those withered
 cheeks
 Whose fount had long been chill'd, but
 that night's term
 Had loosed the springs — for 'twas a fearful
 thing
 To see a nation's hope so blasted. One
 Press'd his dead child unto his heart — no
 spot
 Of livid plague was nigh — no purple cloud
 Of scathing fever — and he struck his brow
 To rouse himself from that wild phantasy
 Deeming it but a vision of the night.
I marked one old man with his only son 70
Lifeless within his arms — his withered hand
Wandering o'er the features of his child
Bidding him [wake] from that long dreary
sleep,
And lead his old blind father from the crowd
To the green meadows — but he answer'd
not;
 And then the terrible truth flash'd on his
 brain,
 And when the throng roll'd on some bade
 him rise
 And cling not so unto the dead one there,
 Nor voice nor look made answer — he was
 gone.
 But one thought chain'd the powers of each 80
 mind
 Amid that night's felt horror — each one
 owned
 In silence the dread majesty — the might
 Of Israel's God, whose red hand had
 avenged
 His servants' cause so fearfully —

II

THE DANCE OF DEATH.

“And as they footed it around,
 They sang their triumphs o'er mankind!”
de Stael.

Fever.

Bow to me, bow to me;
 Follow me in my burning breath,
 Which brings as the simoom destruction
 and death.

My spirit lives in the hectic glow
 When I bid the life streams tainted flow
 In the fervid sun's deep brooding beam
 When seething vapours in volumes steam,
 And they fall — the young, the gay — as
 the flower
 'Neath the fiery wind's destructive power.
 This day I have gotten a noble prize —
 There was one who saw the morning rise,
 And watch'd fair Cynthia's golden streak
 10 Kiss the misty mountain peak,
 But I was there, and my pois'nous flood
 Envenom'd the gush of the youth's warm
 blood.
 They hastily bore him to his bed,
 But o'er him death his swart pennons
 spread:
 The skilled leech's art was vain,
 Delirium revelled in each vein.
 I mark'd each deathly change in him;
 I watch'd his lustrous eye grow dim,
 The purple cloud on his deep swol'n brow,
 20 The gathering death sweat's chilly flow,
 The dull dense film obscure the eye,
 Heard the last quick gasp and saw him die.

Pestilence.

My spirit has past on the lightning's wing
 O'er city and land with its withering;
 In the crowded street, in the flashing hall
 My tramp has been heard: they are lonely
 all.
 A nation has swept at my summons away
 As mists before the glare of day.
 See how proudly reigns my hand
 30 In the black'ning heaps on the surf-beat
 strand
 [Where] ¹ the rank grass grows in deserted
 streets
 [Where] the terrified stranger no passer
 meets
 [] around the putrid air
 [] lurid and red in Erin's stare
 Where silence reigns, where late swell'd the
 lute,
 Thrilling lyre, mellifluous flute.
 There if my prowess ye would know
 Seek ye — and bow to your rival low.

Ague.

Bow to me, bow to me;
 My influence is in the freezing deeps
 Where the icy power of torpor sleeps,
 40 Where the frigid waters flow
 My marble chair is more below;
 When the Grecian brav'd the Hellespont's
 flood
 How did I curdle his fever'd blood,
 And sent his love in tumescent wave
 To meet with her lover an early grave.
 When Hellas' victor sought the rush

¹ Papers removed where sealed.

Of the river to lave in its cooling gush,
 Did he not feel my iron clutch
 When he fainted and sank at my algid
 touch?
 These are the least of the trophies I so
 claim —
 Bow to me then, and own my fame.

Madness.

Hear ye not the gloomy yelling
 Or the tide of anguish swelling,
 Hear ye the clank of fetter and chain,
 Hear ye the wild cry of grief and pain,
 Followed by the shuddering laugh
 As when fiends the life blood quaff?
 See! see that band,
 See how their bursting eyeballs gleam,
 As the tiger's when crouched in the jungle's 60
 lair,
 In India's sultry land.
 Now they are seized in the rabies fell,
 Hark! 'tis a shriek as from fiends of hell;
 Now there is a plaining moan,
 As the flow of the sullen river —
 List! there is a hollow groan.
 Doth it not make e'en *you* to shiver?
 These are they struck of the barbs of my
 quiver.
 Slaves before my haughty throne,
 Bow then, bow to me alone. 70

Consumption.

'Tis for me, 'tis for me;
 Mine the prize of Death must be;
 My spirit is o'er the young and gay
 As on snowy wreaths in the bright noonday.
 They wear a melting and vermeille flush
 E'en while I bid their pulses hush.
 Tracing o'er their dying brow
 With the passions of health's best roseate
 glow
 When the lover watches the full dark eye
 Robed in tints of ianthine dye, 80
 Beaming eloquent as to declare
 The passions that deepen the glories there.
 The frost in its tide of dazzling whiteness,
 As Juno's brow of chrystal brightness,
 Such as the Grecian's hand would give
 When he bade the sculptured marble
 "live,"
 The ruby suffusing the Hebe cheek,
 The pulses that love and pleasure speak
 Can his fond heart claim but another day,
 And the loathsome worm on her form shall 90
 prey.
 She is scathed as the tender flower,
 When mildews o'er its chalice lour.
 Tell me not of her balmy breath,
 Its tide shall be shut in the fold of death;
 Tell me not of her honied lip,
 The reptile's fangs shall its fragrance sip.
 Then will I say triumphantly
 Bow to the deadliest — bow to me!

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